

## *Pisting Yawa*: The Devil who was once a Bisayan Deity

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**Abstract:** After the sudden announcement of the quarantine protocols last March, one of the proponent's closest colleagues (one of Bisayan descent) uttered the in/famous curse word "*Ay Pisting Yawa!*" With how life would be after that, who could blame him? The proponent had long since attempted to investigate the historical roots of this evidently indigenous Bisayan term, prior to its usage for the Devil, as far as late 2017 although he had no full opportunity to do so. The pandemic had caused a thousand sufferings and inconvenience to all, but a spark of light during these trying times came through the form of ample free time to return to this research. The paper will primarily examine pre-Hispanic oral literature and early Spanish documents until the 17th century in an attempt to reconstruct a pre-16th image of the enigmatic *Yawa* prior to its eventual amalgamation with Satan of Judeo-Christian lore. Many aspiring folklorists theorize that the *Yawa* was derived from the Panay epic character Nagmalitong Yawa who was supposedly demonized after the introduction of the Roman Catholic religion however, a thorough investigation of our available sources leans to another direction: *that the epic character was named after the Yawa*, not the other way around. The proponent will utilize the *historical method*, alternatively called the *descriptive-narrative-analytic* method.

**Keywords:** Yawa, Panay-Bukidnon Epics, *Diwata*, Forest Spirits, Bisaya Folklore

### Introduction

Sometime around 2017 and 2018, a new bizarre linguistic phenomenon started to gain a wider traction within the student community of De La Salle University: a new word of Bisayan origin was being adopted within the colloquial Tagalog vocabulary as a new source of oral profanity; or to put it simply, a new curse word. The researcher of course is referring to the term *Yawa* which is attested by informants of Bisayan descent to refer to a localized name for Satan or the Devil. Oftentimes it is also paired with another Bisayan term *pisti* (pest) for the more iconic *Pisting Yawa* (pestering demon or pesky demon). By usage and expression, it is similar to the English *fuck* and the Tagalog *putang ina* that could either be used for jesting, expressing frustrations, and/or shock. It is unknown if the term, as a curse word, has a wide range of usage outside Metro Manila and it is still unknown when exactly Manilaños started using it as a new curse word outside DLSU. Stranger still, informants of Bisayan descent are as confused as the researcher by the sudden popularity of the term since many say

that *Yawa* is not a traditional everyday curse word but rather a taboo word to be avoided as much as possible due to its link to the Devil. One Hiligaynon informant for instance narrates that she began to use "*Yawa*" as a new domestic curse word after learning it from her Tagalog peers, however she was reprimanded by her religious mother for supposedly invoking Satan's name.

Although the Tagalog adoption of *Yawa* is still not clear - if it happened before or only during 2017 - the researcher speculates that the popularity of the term increased in Tagalog pop culture after the positive reception of two short facebook clips of the Japanese anime *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure: Stardust Crusaders* with a Bisaya fan dubbing. From the said clips, Kujo Jotaro, a protagonist of the

series, could be heard uttering “YAWA YAWA YAWA...” as a battlecry (Lising & Skye, 2019).<sup>1</sup>

The usage of *Pisting Yawa* however became intertwined with politics, perhaps for the first time, when a series of editorial cartoons were published by Al Pedroche in *Philstar* in the closing months of 2020, last year. These two cartoons are scatological remarks against President Duterte due to his perceived incompetence in the pandemic. One cartoon, published on Dec 5, satirizes his back-and-forth allegiance to the USA in the aftermath of its recent election, given his mostly anti-American and pro-CCP views beforehand.

The latest cartoon published on Dec 19, satirizes the meme of Duterte dozing off when important events, where he is needed, are taking place. Many comments could be unpacked from the two cartoons but given the socio-political climate when these were posted, it is somewhat obvious that they were made as grievance or sarcastic remarks against his apparent lack of initiative throughout the quarantine period. These were, after all, released nine grueling months after the first lockdown was implemented. In both editorial cartoons, the curse phrase appears as Duterte’s catchphrase, perhaps a homage to his sailor-mouth nature, mainly as his shock reaction or cursing against criticism. Given the President’s Bisaya-Davaoño ancestry, the joke makes more sense instead of using the other unpopular Tagalog phrase. (For the editorial cartoons, see *appendix* below)

The revelation of its new usage could be a plausible study on Public Response or Reaction on Local Governance during the pandemic, but for now, this paper will focus on a Historical and Filipinological setting.

Given its new extensive reach on NCR pop culture, it would be beneficial to discuss what this term actually means. It may have gained online traction over time but it does not mean that everyone actually knows its exact meaning and origin. Even Bisayans themselves might not be fully aware that it pre-dated its Christianized connotation. The primary focus of this study is to investigate the development of the term Yawa within its Bisayan roots as far as pre-Hispanic

Bisayan belief and folklore that later evolved with the arrival of the Christian religion.

But why would this be an important topic during this period? Because there is a recent tragedy closely related to it. This is the true story of how an abstract invisible entity such as the Yawa Devil was used as a scapegoat to justify a vile behavior. On February 12, 2021 a resident of Carcar City, Cebu was arrested for raping his own niece in her own parent’s home. Cases of domestic violence are not new but independent reports state that these terrible cases had drastically increased after the implementation of the quarantine protocols (Abad, 2020; Bonquin, 2020; Calleja, 2020; Gonzales, 2020). The Carcar City incident seems to be a new statistic to this saddening phenomenon but what makes it stand out from the rest is the suspect’s excuse on why he committed the crime. He declared that he was “ordered by the Devil” (*gisugo sa yawa*) while he was in a vulnerable drunk state (Logrino, 2021).

The phrase in this sense is no longer just a meme that we can all just laugh at. It still has a strong cultural grip on Bisayans that it still instills fear to the common man. It could explain why many Bisayans, especially the religious ones, do not take it kindly when the Devil’s name is spoken of even as a joke because to them, it may have unspeakable consequences. This is not even particularly new since as far as the current findings in the main study show, the “Yawa” has a long history of being a malevolent force spanning from ancient times, even before Catholic friars came into our shores.

### The Yawa in Pre-Hispanic Panay Epics

The difficulty of the “Yawa’s” roots could be summarized in the following points: (1) almost all Spanish records, most notably *diccionarios*, unanimously define it as a reference to the Christian Devil and (2) its usage is very vague in the Central Panay epics. This section will focus on the clues presented by the epics in characterizing the yawa, if it is a reference to a single unique entity or perhaps a category of supernatural creatures. It is also important to disprove misconceptions about the pre-Hispanic yawa that had been circulating for an unknown amount of time. The researcher refers to the erroneous idea that the Yawa is one and the same with Nagmalitong Yawa, a recurring character

<sup>1</sup> Links to the two short clips are: Part I (<https://tinyurl.com/yas8avds>) and Part II (<https://tinyurl.com/y8drt8du>)

in the Panay Epic Tradition. One proponent of this view is the Facebook page *Karakoa Productions* (2020) that posted a series of infographics (*Pulung of the Day*), providing etymological origins of infamous Bisayan profanities. The “Yawa” entry goes as follows,<sup>2</sup>

y@wa [sic]

Derivatives: yawaa, kayawa, pagkayawa

Wife of the Visayan god of darkness, sister of the goddess of greed, niece of the goddess of earthquakes in the ancient Visayan epic *Hinilawod*. Demonized by the Spaniards.

The researcher will no longer go over the other inaccuracies of the post, especially its caption,<sup>3</sup> but the definition above is a fairly accurate description of the character *Nagmalitong Yawa* based on her characterization in the “Three Brothers of Panay,” a major story in Jocano’s *Outline of Philippine Mythology* (1969). The online definition asserts that *Nagmalitong Yawa* was the original *Yawa*, prior to the Spanish “demonization” of the term. In other words, the curse word came from this pre-Hispanic “goddess” figure. There is however a major issue with this popular theory; two epic traditions, *Hugan-an* (2000) and *Caballero* (2019), distinguish her from a generic *yawa* (*yawaon*) and they do not provide a concrete link between the two names. This is further strengthened since the brief reference to a *yawa* (*yawaon*) had nothing to do with *Nagmalitong Yawa* at all but is used as an analogy to the pet cocks of *Burulakaw*.<sup>4</sup> The following lines from the *Hugan-an* (2000) epic is as follows,

*Binubungang hantay*

(Those perched on rooftops and)

*Tinikmang haraya*

(On trees that surrounded the house)

<sup>2</sup> Link to the image:  
(<https://tinyurl.com/ye3k5l7u>)

<sup>3</sup> For example, the post mistakenly attributes a narrative consistency between Ulang Udig’s (1965) *Labaw Donggon* and *Hugan-an*’s (2000) *Hinilawod*, depicting the *Nagmalitong Yawa* of both epics as the same character. A paper refuting these common misconceptions has been made previously. See Talaguit (2020), “*Tales from the Mouth of the Halawod River...*”

*Agak i Burulakaw.*  
(Were pets of *Burulakaw*.)

*Malatubang yawaon*  
(Fierce-feathered like the *cape of yawa*)

*Ku pulang anislagon.*  
(Dark red spotted with gray were their colors)

- *Hugan-an*, HHT, lines 110-114

This is not a mere coincidence. The connection is repeated again in *Caballero*’s (2019) *Tarangban* epic but referring this time to the cocks of *Labaw Donggon*. The important lines go as follows,

*Agak ni Labaw Donggon*  
(The rooster of *Labaw Donggon*)

*Malatubang yawa-on pula nga anislodon*  
(With orange, black, and red feathers)

*Bukay nga kanawayon*  
(And white hues)

- *Caballero*, S:HT, lines 4700-4702

The phrase of interest is *malatubang yawaon*, the “cape of *yawa*” as translated by Jocano (2000). In contemporary Hiligaynon and Kinaraya grammar, the suffix “-on” represents an attribution to a person or an object. In English, its closest counterpart is “having the quality [of something].”<sup>5</sup> Kaufman (1934) simply defines *yawaon* as “devilish” which gives the connotation of “having the traits/qualities [of the devil].” Yet, Jocano by the virtue of his translation gives an implication that the suffix could also mean “belonging to [someone].” Hence, the translation could also be rendered as “the cape (*malatubang*) belonging to *Yawa*.” The differences between Kaufmann and Jocano respectively could represent a grammatical form

<sup>4</sup> The father of the hero *Humadapnon* in the Panay epics, notably in *Hugan-an* (2000) and *Caballero* (2019). In the *Maragtas* story, he is the patron god of the Bornean *datus* and lives on top of Mt. *Madyaas* (Santaren, 1954; Monteclaro, 1916).

<sup>5</sup> One Hiligaynon informant uses the term “*artistahon*” (*artista* + *-hon*) as an example. It roughly translates to handsome/beautiful but literally translates to: “[someone who] looks like an actor/ actress.”

present in the archaic Ligbok or *Binukidnon* that is no longer retained in modern Hiligaynon/Karay-a. This is just a speculation though, equally worthy of study within the field of linguistics and shall be left open for more suitable scholars.

But for all intents and purposes, the researcher is going to assume that Jocano's translation is correct, perhaps representing a Ligbok definition. But a looming question remains: who then is this Yawa whose cape is likened to the feathers of a rooster? Jocano (2000) leaves a vague footnote that defines it as "a dark, powerful spirit." This is the only extant description of this being in the Hugan-an epic; it does not even appear physically plot-wise in any of the published Panay-Bukidnon epic. As such, save for Jocano's footnote, there are only passing references to its existence in lore.

Regardless, the short phrase already implies what this creature might have been in the pre-Hispanic past. Firstly (1), it is a *single unique entity* ["the Yawa"], NOT a supernatural class ["*the yawas*"]; and secondly (2), this Yawa character is NOT one and the same with Nagmalitong Yawa because she is almost unanimously regarded as a human heroine in the epics while the former is implied as a malevolent ("dark") power. One might argue that the malevolent implications of the Yawa could have been a colonial influence; Roman Catholicism was accepted after all in Panay-Bukidnon society when Jocano (1965) initially conducted his fieldwork from 1955 to 1957. Even so, the researcher rejects this idea. One counter-argument is the fact that the majority of the religious rituals and traditions in Panay-Bukidnon society were almost devoid of Christian influences prior to the 21st century. Spanish expressions like "Hesus Maria!" do appear in some epics but it did not corrupt or introduce anachronistic elements in the actual narrative (e.g. Jesus or Mary do not appear in person). As such, it is argued that the "dark, powerful" trait was originally part of the Yawa's pre-Christian characterization. How so will be shown in the later subsections.

Before moving on from the rooster and Yawa connection, there is one last interesting point that should be noted by the reader. The term "yawaon" also appears in Encarnacion's (1885) *diccionario*. At first glance the entry does not seem to be related to a sentient entity but observe its definition,

**Yaoaon.** Gallo de plumas coloradas, con algunos matices negros. (p. 430)

**Yawaon.** Rooster with red feathers, with some black hues.

Notice the connection with the two previous epic excerpts. So what is with the Yawa's obsession with cocks? Unfortunately this will remain unanswered in this section, not because no answer was found but because the source materials in this department are too vague and lacking. This could be a case of a cultural drift, where certain cultural contexts are no longer explained since everyone in that culture group already knows it. So why would they need to put it into detail? For a modern example, when we hear the expression "Jesus Christ!" we no longer ask who this Jesus guy is because almost everyone is vaguely aware of his story.

The researcher will close this chapter by examining, and refuting, two other scholarly attempts in defining the term. Magos (1999), linking the entity to Nagmalitong Yawa, defines it as "woman of prowess" (p. 10). Nagmalitong Yawa's full name is also given as "beautiful woman of prowess." There are holes with this assertion for two main reasons. One, there are many women of magical abilities and prowess in the epics but none of them are ever called "yawas" by name or epithet. There is also Magos' faulty definition of "nagmalitong" itself because it definitely DOES NOT mean "beautiful" in any of the Panay languages. Some Ligbok terms for *beautiful*, used in the epics, are "madaligan," "madayhakan," or "buntog." The latter is even used to refer to Nagmalitong Yawa herself in Hugan-an's (2000) epic. In Hiligaynon and Kinaray-a, it's "matahum" or "maanyag."

There is another etymology by David Govey (2017) which harmonizes more with Jocano's definition. By investigating the etymological root of "nagmalitong" (*mali*) in Mentrída's *Diccionario* (1841) and Kaufmann's *Visayan-English Dictionary* (1934), Govey concluded that Nagmalitong Yawa's name could be accurately translated as *taking the*



*form of a spirit [nagmali (ad)tong yawa].*<sup>6</sup> The translation of yawa to “spirit” is Govey’s innovation within a pre-Hispanic context since both dictionaries contain the devilish connotation. Regardless, if questioned on who came first - Nagmalitong Yawa or the Yawa - the answer is the latter; the former was named after the latter, NOT vice-versa.

The only issue with Govey’s idea is his identification of the Yawa with deified ancestors. There is actually a term used for ancestral spirits in Bukidnon and lowland cultures of Panay, and *it is not yawa*. Deified ancestors are collectively called *kapupu-an*, but individually called *apuy*, *pupuy*, or *papu* (Magos, 1993; Jocano, 2007; Aguilar Jr., 2013). In summary, Govey is correct that Yawa precedes the character of Nagmalitong Yawa, but he is incorrect to link it to deified ancestors.

### Alcina’s *Yawa* and the Nature of Bisayan *Pneumatology*

In 1668, Fr. Francisco Ignacio Alcina published his nine volume magnum opus called *Historia de las islas e indios de Bisayas* [History of the islands and *indios* of Bisayas]. The text provides geographic, zoological, botanical, ethnographic, and anthropological accounts concerning the transition of the Bisayan Islands from their pre-16th century culture to the customs introduced by Spanish authorities. These he took from painstaking observations of the ordinary life of the people during his three decades long ministry that initially began in 1634. The work is important to this study because many of the customs described are of pre-Hispanic origin, either still being practiced or recently extinguished yet still within the living memory of the 17th century Bisayans. On the surface, Alcina’s account does not entirely differ with the *diccionarios* in his belief in the oneness of the Yawa and the Christian Devil. However, Alcina’s sole advantage from his peers are the legends and folklore related to the entity that, although short and in passing, exhibits peculiar pre-16th elements mostly devoid of Christianization.

In Book I (Chapter I), Alcina (2002) is aware of the devilish connotation of the term yet suggests that it originates from the Javanese (*Java*) of present-day Indonesia. Alcina adds that it has the

additional connotation of a non-Christian, hence the phrase “Yawa-pa” (*Java-pa*) or *still subject to the Yawa devil*. But there is an issue with Alcina’s Javanese theory. Assuming that some of his informants do profess Javanese ancestries, external sources suggest that this is a minor tradition. In contrast, the Bornean Settlement Tradition is far more attested (Santaren, 1958; Montecarlo, 1916; Funtecha, 1995; Reyes-Tinangan, 2001; Laboriante-Pacheo, 2011; Sonza, 2012).

In Book II (Chapter XX), Alcina (2004) reports a certain “high mountain” located in the island of Ibabao in Eastern Samar. This mountain is called “Yawa,” the name which “the devil had in ancient times among these natives.” In this mountain, there is “a very large cave” of great size and spacious vaults containing stalactites and stalagmites “resembling organs, great rounded columns...” This information is noteworthy if compared to another section (Book III - Chapter XVI) where he discusses the local beliefs in supernatural kidnapping. Generally, this was done by a *diwata* to a person either to adopt him as a son (if male) or to make her its wife (if female). There are two methods to perform this: (1) to kill the person immediately or gradually by illness, presumably to take their souls or (2) to snatch them both body and soul so that “no traces of bones or hair was left behind.” Alcina (2005) further narrates that the Yawa also performs the same violent snatching to beautiful women and imprisons (*pagbukot*) them “in order to abuse them” (pp. 332-333). It was this belief that supposedly caused women to be modest in clothing in order to avoid being targeted by spiritual suitors. The Yawa’s link to a mountain cave immediately suggests that it imprisoned women in its mountainous abode in Eastern Samar. This would further suggest that the Yawa was regarded as a male *diwata* and will be considered as such.

Supernatural snatching is a common motif in Panay folklore. In Caballero’s (2014) *Pahagunong* epic, Matan-ayon, the wife of Labaw Donggon, was almost snatched by a heavenly deity Pahagunong had it not been from the joint efforts of Buyong Makalimpong (*Matan-ayon in male form*), and other heroes. This is apparently a common occurrence that earlier in the same story, Matan-ayon was warned by Datu Paibare, her guardian, to take haste in bathing outside lest she be struck by a spell (*tapyon*

<sup>6</sup> Mentrída (1841) defines *Mali* as: “Tomar figura de alguno el diablo... [to take some form of the

devil...]” (p. 262); Kaufman (1934) defines *Mali* as: “Excuse, pretense, *appearance*, *make-believe*, trap...” (p. 304)

*ka't katadlaya*) because of her beauty (*pagkagayon*). True enough, her beauty attracted the attention of the sky deity when she bathed at the coast. In the next *Kalampay* (2014) epic, Matan-ayon was kidnapped by the underworld deity Masangladon. Similar to Pahagunong, Masangladon was captivated by her beauty as she bathed outside. Instead of an upfront snatching, the deity sent forth his pet giant *kalampay* or crab to a vicinity close to Matan-ayon's bathing spot. It travelled so slowly that trees started growing atop its shell, and if it stopped moving, it could be mistaken for an island. When Matan-ayon ventured to the "island," the *kalampay* took the opportunity and carried the woman back to its master. To avoid Masangladon's sexual advances, Matan-ayon morphed herself into water every night as she waited for her husband's rescue. In the *Tarangban* epics of Huga-an (2000) and Caballero (2019), the hero Humadapnon was enticed by a legion of female *diwatas* and was imprisoned in the white *Tarangban* cave for 7 years before being rescued by the heroine Nagmalitong Yawa.

There is another folk story recorded in Eastern Leyte concerning a mysterious cave in Bangon, Tanauan that is supposedly connected to the *Sutohon* caves in Mt. Danglay in Samar. The latter cave system supposedly houses gold that is guarded by a mermaid (*kataw*) who kills anyone "any time she felt like it." It is also said that if the mermaid takes a liking to someone "she'll take it," implying either a romantic or lustful motivation (Alunan, 2016, p. 15).

The precedence of these narrative elements in different mediums of folklore would, without a doubt, indicate that Yawa does not differ much from his *diwata* peers in the Bisayan socio-religious system.

It should also be noted that *diwata* is an encompassing term for the supernatural, not limited to female goddesses, nymphs, or fairies alone. It is used for heavenly spirits such as Labaw Donggon (*ELD*, lines 738-741); underworldly spirits such as Baranugon (*ELD*, lines 1076-1081); and earth spirits such as the *binukot* maidens of the *Tarangban* cave (HHT, lines 1075-1080).

Spanish records also provide context on what was considered a *diwata* in Bisayan culture. 16th century Cebuanos regarded the Sto. Nino image as a *diwata*, according to Pedro Chirino (2010). Chirino also attributes the term to generic idols or images, many of which are usually adored

for agricultural and fishing purposes. He also reveals that these images included deified ancestors that "they invoked first in their toils and dangers," indicating that the *pupuy* and *umalagad* are regarded as *diwatas*. This information is corroborated by a *babaylan* prayer from Maasin, Iloilo (Villareal, 1997) invoking seven *diwatas* living in Mt. Madyaas: (a) Burulakaw, (b) Andugon, (c) Magbanog, (d) *Bangutbanwa*, (e) *Solian*, (f) *Mangindalon*, and (g) Puting Daraga.

Notable are *Bangutbanwa*, *Solian*, and *Mangindalon* because they were introduced as human characters, albeit with priestly roles, in the *Maragtas* story. There is also the triadic *busalian* datus Sumakwel, Paiburong, and *Bangkaya* who were also invoked later in the same prayer. In folklore, they are mostly presented as supermen (*busalian*), and are invoked as deified ancestors (Jocano, 1965; Fernandez, 2006). These are just some of the many classes of *diwata*, not even including the "gods" or *dioses* mentioned in Spanish reports.

At this point, we have a general idea that the *diwatas* (1) are any type or form of supernatural beings with powers beyond a normal human; (2) yet, similar to humans, they are not omni-benevolent and could either be benevolent or malevolent, (3) they are not omnipotent and they can be killed; and (4) they are both revered and feared by the Bisayans.

Returning to Alcina, the figure's next account appears in Book III (Chapter XI). In this section, recorded from informants in Samar, the Yawa acts as an "executioner" (*fiscal de ejecuciones*) of the Supreme God Maka-ubus who "dwelled on a very high mountain" and spies on anyone he wanted to kill (pp. 222-223). It is never specified why. Maka-ubus simply sends Yawa to kill those he wished to kill. It is possible that his behavior is an attempt to rationalize sudden deaths such as drowning, as well as those who died mysteriously in "their homes and beds" (ibid). Yawa's gruesome method of choice is strangulation. The Maka-ubus/Yawa tandem has a striking resemblance to God and Satan's relationship in the Book of Job. Coincidentally, Alcina also makes a strange suggestion that Maka-ubus was the local name for the Biblical God as the "Alpha and Omega" while the devilish association of the Yawa is maintained in his account. Although striking indeed, it should be regarded as a local coincidence for now, used later for Spanish theological exegesis. The Panay-Bukidnon narrates a similar entity who strangles children. Newborn

children were said to be visited by the spirit Patagaes at midnight. He asks the child how long it wants to live and in what manner it wishes to die. If someone witnesses this secret conversation, the spirit “chokes the child to death” (Jocano, 2008, pp. 174-175). Although not remotely similar in function, the violent tendencies of these two spirits could exhibit a native explanation on sudden and unexpected deaths, especially those of family members.

The last mention of Alcina’s Yawa is in Book III (Chapter XV). In this section, Yawa is referred to as a *diwata*, within the *banwanun* category. It comes from the root word *banwa*, (forest), and the suffix “-non” (dweller); he is a “forest dweller” and is even called “the lord of the forests” (*señor del monte*). He has the authority to control the subjects of his domain, most especially wild pigs, which are sought out by local hunters. As such, it was customary amongst hunters to build a small altar or house built upon a single pillar called *pagyawa* and offer there their first catch to appease the spirit. This is done so that the Yawa would not impede them from capturing wild game in future expeditions.

It is through this function that we return to his symbolic connection to the rooster or *red junglefowl*. These are some observations about the animal. Firstly, the roosters in pre-Hispanic society are mostly tamed, not domesticated. This means that these are often captured from the wild (*los gallos de monte*) instead of being raised in captivity. A wild rooster’s territorial nature is exploited by placing a tamed one and surrounding it with traps as the hunters await a challenger (Alcina, 2004). From this, we can assume why the red junglefowl was symbolically connected with Yawa. As the lord of the forests, he holds sway not only to the wild boars but also to the wild cocks, if not all wild beasts within his domain. Although not specifically mentioned, it would appear that lordship over the fowls are passed over after catching the animal and there appears to be no repercussions by catching one, unlike the wild boar. As such, it is possible that the “pets” of Munsad Burulakaw and Labaw Donggon were once the *pets* of Yawa before their probable capture.

### ***Pisting Yawa ka Animal!* - Pestering Spirits of the Forest**

Out of all the information Alcina provides concerning this enigmatic being, him being a *diwata* of the forest provides the greatest clue on why he would later be associated with the Biblical Devil. Generally speaking, *banwanons* (forest spirits) are one of the most feared entities in Bisayan folklore because many of them are not only powerful but also malevolent in nature. There were the *nonoc* (i.e. balete) tree spirits who promised deadly retribution to anyone who dared cut down their beloved home. There were also the *muwas*, a race of man-eating hairy giants who live in caves. In the *Tikum Kadlum* (2014) epic, Buyong Paiburong was so scared at the prospect of being eaten by a *muwa* that he did not hesitate to offer his daughters to compensate for a crime he committed.

The inhabitants of Brgy. Buntod, Panay, Capiz also considers land and the forest in general as *mari-it* (dangerous) and useless because, unlike the sea, it yields nothing other than coconuts. Similarly, the inhabitants of Brgy. Igdalaguit, Dao, Antique also considers the forest as *mari-it* although the sea is considered more dangerous. The inhabitants of Boracay also consider forests to be *mari-it*, especially caves and *lunok* (nonoc) trees which are regarded as the homes of *engkantos* (Magos, 1994).

This fear of forest spirits is also manifested in how the Panay-Bukidnon conduct their aforementioned agricultural rituals when establishing a *kaingin* (slash and burn) site. It is inevitable for a Panay-Bukidnon to one day converse with a forest spirit since one of the main occupations is farming. Since the traditional form of farming is *kaingin*, a forest spot must be chosen to become the planting site. The conversion process from forest to arable land is so meticulous that any premonition of displeasement in the spirit’s part will be considered as a sign to leave and establish another site elsewhere, even if prior rituals had already been conducted in the site. This is not due to reverence but rather fear since according to local belief, these spirits are capricious beings who change their minds often (Jocano, 2008). Such are their fears that they rarely offer religious rites to the forest spirits.

In the clearing phrase, a farmer and a *babaylan* offer food not to the spirits of the forest but to the *umalagad*, deified ancestral spirits. These spirits act as the intermediaries between the mortal farmer and the forest spirits. During this phase, the *sagda* ritual is also conducted where an altar called *papag* is constructed. There, food is offered and the *babaylan* is possessed by the ancestral spirits and

converses with the farmer if their efforts are successful.

A make-shift altar is made for another ritual called *handaegan* and the babaylan starts with an invocation to his/her spirit-protectors and ancestral spirits to protect him/her from the malevolent forest spirits. This is where we get a glimpse on who these spirits are since a portion of the prayer says,

“...intercede for us to the higher spirits, tell them to harm us no more because we farmed this place, tell them to chain their *tamawu*, the *talayhang*, *manimanhaw*, *bangkayaw burulakaw*.” (ibid, p. 208)

There is also another ritual with some similarities to the aforementioned *pangyawa*. In the *tugalbaeng* ritual, a make-shift hut with an altar is made and a chicken is butchered as an offering both to the forest spirits and the ancestral spirits who are once again asked to intercede to the former so that they would no longer send pests to damage their crops. The chicken legs are offered in the altar proper while the *head* is buried underneath the altar (ibid). Compare this to the *pagyawa* ritual where the first catch is offered to Yawa. This is done either by offering the whole body or at least the *pig’s head* (Alcina, 2005).

With all the information provided above, it gives a strong implication that Yawa was already feared as a malevolent spirit even prior to the coming of the Spaniards, the “dark, powerful spirit” in the *Hinilawod* epic. Although not referring to Yawa specifically, Jocano summarizes the Panay-Bukidnon view of the *banwanons*, which was preserved from their pre-16th Bisayan ancestors,

The Sulod [i.e. Panay-Bukidnon] believe that the environmental spirits are just like ordinary men. Moreover, their association with the ancestral spirits has “humanized” them. Thus, they learned to like human food, to feel like human beings, and to behave like other men. It is only their power to be invisible which differentiates them from the ordinary Sulod. *They have their own whims and caprices, their vices and virtues, their weaknesses and strengths.*

<sup>7</sup> The hut built to house his offerings is described as “*rather high* (esta alta) and had only one *harigi* (pillar)” (Alcina, 2005, pp. 300-301).

That is why every Sulod is careful when dealing with the spirits (Jocano, 2008, pp. 212-213).

## A Study of Ontology

If Yawa is a name of an individual rather than a classification of a supernatural race, then what category would he belong to? *Banwanon* refers to his role as a deity that holds power over the forest but there are many entities under this umbrella term so this is not the correct concept we are looking for.

Based on the hints presented, the researcher argues that Yawa is a *muwa*, a race of man-eating giants feared even by heroes in the Panay-Bukidnon epics, or its regional counterparts in the other Bisayan islands. He is implied to be tall,<sup>7</sup> a generic trait common amongst all *muwas* of Panay lore such as Saragnayan and the sibling pair Amburukay and Makabagting. Their traits are summarized as follows:

- They are tall, gigantic in stature
- They are supernatural spirits, under the class of *dutang-on* or earth spirits
- They have magical talismans also used by heroes
- They are feared as “aswangs” or flesh-eaters

Another possible candidate is the *Onglo*, also a race of giants that are well attested in Waray and Cebuano folklore. Matheo Sanchez (1711) defines this creature as a *diwata*, [the] *Yawa devil* (“*diuata, yaua diablo*”). Other authors have slightly different definitions. De Mentrída (1841) defines the creature not as a *diwata* but as a male sorcerer (*Hechizero, brujo*). Encarnacion (1885) says it encompasses both male and female sorcerers (*de ambos sexo*). Dela Rosa (1895) adds “a man, very tall, that lives in the woods” (*un hombre, muy alto, que vive en los bosques*). In the Espanol-Bisaya *diccionario* of the same author (1914), it is identified as a *duende* with additional links with the aswang, balbal, and the concept of *barang*.

Stories of the Onglos are strangely scarce. The only tales specifically connected to them, so far discovered, is from Alcina’s reports. Alcina (2005) contrasts many of the above definitions by declaring



that the Onglo is “not a witch nor a *diwata* nor even only a soul or a spector” (*no es brujo, ni divata, ni alma sola o espectro*) (pp. 370-371). He describes the creature as a being of material flesh “resembling a black man, who in stature, is taller by one and a half times of an ordinary person. It is thin and ugly in appearance and *always dwells in the mountains*” (ibid).

Alcina was most likely mistaken to remove the “spiritual” designation of the Onglo because the flesh-spirit dichotomy in Christian theology is a blurry concept in native religious tradition. While often regarded as “spirits,” the diwatas’ only general similarity with Christian spirits is that both are conceived as invisible under normal circumstances. However, as attested in folk stories and legends, the diwatas often perform the same functions and have many commonalities with the human experience: they marry, have sex, give birth to children, feel pain, and even die. So, while the Onglos are described in an “empirical” way as Alcina observes, it does not automatically mean that they are not diwatas. Based on the contradicting data provided by various Spanish chroniclers, the Onglos could be summarized by the following points:

- They are tall
- They are supernatural spirits
- They have an affinity with magic and sorcery
- They are feared as “aswangs” or flesh-eaters

Observe the uncanny similarity of traits with the Panay *Muwas*. Returning to Alcina (ibid), he reports that the common tales associated with the Onglos are their activity of kidnapping mortals, especially children and young women. Surprisingly, the Onglos generally are not imagined as malevolent - unlike Yawa - only kidnapping their victims to foster them for a few years “in their dark dwelling” in the “distant mountains” before returning them to human settlements. This is also done to kidnapped women who obviously “did not adjust to living with them” (pp. 370-371).

Now, for their similarities. Both Yawa and the Onglos are said to dwell in forests, mountains, and caves, perform mortal kidnappings, and are described as tall. The primary difference is the motive for the kidnappings: the Onglos generally do it to establish kinship relations, either by adopting human children or having common law marriage with women while Yawa’s primary motive is a suggestive lustful desire. As such, while Yawa

himself is a de facto malevolent deity, the Onglos are generally depicted as internally benevolent although questionable in terms of their actions. So is Yawa not an Onglo then? Not exactly. Similar to the case of the general diwata, there is no concrete sense of moral certainty. Just because a class of spirits are generally regarded as malevolent, it does not mean that every individual of that group is malevolent, and vice versa. Just because Yawa is malevolent, it does not mean that he is not an Onglo; he could simply be a rare case of a malevolent kind.

Take for instance his Panay kin. In the *Tikum Kadlum* epic, the sibling duo of Makabagting and Amburukay are feared because they are said to be *aswangs*, hungering for human flesh. Makabagting fits this stereotype as he prepares to cook the heroines Matan-ayon and Surangga-on for dinner. However he is greatly contrasted by his sister Amburukay whose maternal instincts activated upon seeing the children. Instead of cooking them, she adopted them as her own children. With Amburukay’s protection, the heroines grew up to be beautiful women. The maternal bond between the three flourished to the point that the heroines considered their adoptive mother nearly as their real mother. As such, when it was time for Amburukay to leave them after marrying them off, the sorrowful Matan-ayon begged her not to abandon them; even threatening to annul her marriage immediately.

Moral ambiguity and individuality is also featured in Saragnayan’s character in Ulang Udig’s epic. Similar to Amburukay, he is suspected to be an *aswang* however he acts similar to the so-called *hero antagonist* in literature which, as the name implies, is framed as the sympathetic antagonist. The hero Labaw Donggon is the story’s protagonist but it could be argued that he is the villain or *hubris* hero because he desired another man’s wife.

Saragnayan, Nagmalitong Yawa’s actual husband, performs his duty to protect her. This is not just a speculation; the Panay-Bukidnon of Lambunao, from where this particular version is narrated, generally condemned Labaw Donggon’s “undesirable behavior” (Jocano, 1965). It is also peculiar why after defeating the hero, Saragnayan did not just kill and eat him if he is indeed an *aswang*, thus suggesting that he is leaning more

within the side of benevolence.<sup>8</sup> One might argue that he only spared the hero to eat him later, but this does not explain why he kept him as a prisoner for many years.

Saragnayan himself does not reveal his motive even when questioned by his wife. With this perspective in mind, the eventual battle of Buyong Baranugon and Buyong Saragnayan could be regarded as an ideological battle rather than a simple rescue mission. Saragnayan was justified to make Labaw Donggon his prisoner. Meanwhile, Baranugon was also obligated by duty to kill Saragnayan as kinship retribution, to restore the lost honor of his father. Before the final battle that would seal his fate, Saragnayan begged Baranugon to bid his last farewell to his wife, a sorrowful episode preceding the end of the so-called “villain” of the story.

So where does Yawa fit in this frame of thought? Present evidence based on characteristics and similarities points to the direction that the Yawa is part of the Onglo-Muwa giant race. However, unlike the benevolent Amburukay, Yawa is closer to Makabagting who possesses a malevolent nature.

### **“Ang Karaang Bitin:” From God to Devil**

Now we return to the Devil Yawa, the identity that the Bisayan majority now know him as. The oldest Spanish document to attest Yawa’s satanic transformation is De Mentrída (1637), roughly 70 years after Legaspi’s arrival in 1565. It is uncertain if this was now the popular native definition or if this was only utilized by the Clergy. Even so Alcina, who was starting his ministry during this period, leans to a now popular usage amongst the newly baptized natives even if some of the pre-Hispanic myths of Yawa survived.

Another important question comes to mind: why was Yawa specifically chosen as a local counterpart to the Great Enemy of Christianity? There is no certainty but it might have occurred as a way of rebranding local divinities who the friars regarded as demonic entities. In the dualistic Christian worldview, there is only the celestial

realm of God, angels, and saints and the infernal realm of Satan and his demons. Any local deity that did not fit the “holy” scale would have immediately been called a corrosive demon (cf. Boxer Codex, 2016).

And even with the small data we have about Yawa’s pre-Hispanic identity, it is obvious how he became demonized. He killed almost without warning, he stole women and perhaps raped them, he might have eaten people, and he might have been fickle-minded similar to his forest peers. Arguably, the Bisayans already feared and perhaps hated him. A slight push from an external source was all that was needed for the Bisayans to abandon this harmful god.

Why he was identified with Satan specifically rather than a generic demon is still a mystery, but it implies that Yawa was a well-known figure within the Bisayan sphere of influence, most notably in the Waray regions and Panay. In the case of the latter, he is very important and known that even a famous heroine was named after him, attesting further to Yawa’s great influence in Bisayan life. This “worldly” involvement along with his malevolent attributes could have been the catalyst for a local Satan figure ready to be formed by a religious clergy egressing from a Medieval world.

While the exact “whens” and “hows” of this transition are still an open question, the reality of this cultural “rebranding” is evident even until now. Other than the aforementioned *diccionarios*, the term in its new colonial context is preserved to us in Spanish-era *novenas*, official Church prayers, and even Biblical translations in the Bisayan tongues.

*Diccionario* entries are fascinating since the term Yawa does not solely appear in “yaua” or etymologically related entries (e.g. yauaon, yauan-on), but also is referenced in completely different and even unrelated terms, usually in the sample sentences. For instance, in De Mentrída’s (1637) entry for “Bauí” (*bawí*), a sample sentence is provided as follows (p. 97),

si JesuCristo amoy *binmaui* canatun sa  
sacup, cag sapag olipon sa *yaua* canatun...

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<sup>8</sup> Saragnayan has a pet wild boar that held his *ginhawa* (life essence), which made him immortal. The killing of this boar led to his later

demise. Observe the similarities with Yawa and his dominion over wild boars.

Our Jesus Christ freed us from subjection,  
and our enslavement by the Devil (Yawa)...

Encarnacion (1885) says that due to its strong association with the devil, its usage as an expression is often avoided and regarded as “rude, ugly, and scandalous when applied to any creature” (p. 430). Yet Dela Rosa (1885) reveals that not all Bisayans followed this taboo, especially in Samar and Leyte, who often used it to express “surprise, admiration, disgust, and indignation.” In other words, as profanity.

Last 2018, a simple *Visita Iglesia* annually conducted by the family of fellow scholar Deo (Bisaya, *dee-o*) Cruzada yielded an unexpected discovery within the use of the term in official Church prayers. From an unspecified parish in Leyte, Cruzada took notice of the standard prayer for St. Michael the Archangel. The Cebuano prayer goes as follows,

Sr. San Miguel Archangel, tabangi kami sa pang-gubatan. Panalipdi kami batok sa kangil-ad sa *yawa* ug sa iyang mga laang. Santaon unta siya sa Ginoo, nangmuyo kami nga mapaubsanon; ug ikaw, O Principe, sa kasundaluan sa Langit, pinaagi sa Diosnong gahom, ibanlod sa impyerno si Satanang uban sa iyang dautang mga espiritu, nga naglibot sa kalibutan aron pagpukan sa mga kalag.

Amen

Lord St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of *the devil*. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray. And do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly army, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who wander about the world for the ruin of souls.

Amen

This is not a Vatican II innovation but rather a translation tradition that had existed even at the height of the Spanish era. While Bible translations in the Bisaya languages were scarce, if at all existent, the *novena* prayer books and sermons continued to preserve the Devil Yawa in the Roman Catholicism of the Bisayan islands. The oldest

Bisayan sermon book in the online Spanish archives is a collection of sermons called “Ang Magtutuoan nga Palaoali” by one Juan Planas (1865). An excerpt from the text goes as follows,

Ang icatulo ca icadaut nga pagsacpan sa tauo nga masaquit nga dagco guican sa yaoa. Oalay duhaduha nga ang yaoa masingcamut caayo sa pagdaot canatu sa capatusan sa atong quinahuhi...

The third destructive human catastrophe (perdition) is a great pain (sickness) from the devil. There is no doubt that the devil’s purpose is to bring harm to man at the end of his life...<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, the greatest preserver of the Devil Yawa is the Bible itself in Bisayan translations. The history of the Bisayan Bible is still an unexplored cave to the researcher but generally speaking, full translations (from the Old to the New Testament) were decades younger than the full Tagalog *Ang Biblia* completed in 1905. The researcher will only consult Cebuano Bibles for the sake of brevity.

The *Bag-ong Kalibotang Hubad* (BKH, 1984), the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Cebuano NWT, uses Yawa in place of “the Devil” in 31 verses and occurs a total of 33 times:

- 6 in Mt, 5 in Lk, 2 in Jn, 2 in Acts, 2 in Eph, 2 in I Tim, 1 in II Tim, 1 in Heb, 1 in Jas, 1 in I Pet, 4 in I Jn, 1 in Jd, and 5 in Rev.

“Yawa” is only used for “the Devil” epithet never to lesser or generic demons (e.g. Deut 32:17. “mga demonyo”). It is also never used as a replacement for “Satan” itself, which is instead rendered as “Satanas” (e.g. Job 1:6).

However, it is absolutely nothing by comparison to the *Maayong Balita Biblia* (MBB, 2019) which utilizes the term in 114 verses, with a total of 128 occurrences. It is used 50 times specifically for Satan’s major epithets (e.g. the Devil, the Evil One, the Tempter), 77 times for lesser demons (“mga yawa,” and “giyawaan”), and 1 time for “devilish” (*yawan-on*). These are the quantities of occurrence per book:

- 31 in Mt, 18 in Mk, 33 in Lk, 11 in Jn, 2 in Acts, 4 in I Cor, 3 in Eph, 1 in I Thes, 3 in I

<sup>9</sup> One informant identifies the text as using a certain Sialo or Carcar-Dalaguete dialect.

Tim, 1 in II Tim, 1 in Heb, 2 in Jas, 1 in I Pet, 9 in I Jn, 2 in Jd, and 6 in Rev.<sup>10</sup>

One verse in the MBB concerning the Devil Yawa is as follows,

Gitambog ang dakong dragon, ang karaang bitin nga ginganlag Yawa o Satanas nga maoy naglimbong sa tibuok kalibotan.

The huge dragon was thrown out—that ancient serpent, named the Devil, or Satan, that deceived the whole world.

(Rev 12:9, MBB & GNT)

The researcher will end this section with a scatological legend promulgated during the 19th century against the Negros haciendero, Isidro dela Rama (Aguilar, 2013). Dela Rama was an imposing figure because not only was he an *indio*, but he was a successful one who reportedly was on blows with the Spanish clergy. To his fellow natives, his luck (*swerte*) was a sign of a strong *dungan* (spirit/influential power) but to his ecclesiastical opponents, this could be nothing more than the works of the devilish Yawa.

Rumor has it that to obtain his financial success, he sold his soul (*kalag*) to the Yawa. In exchange, the Yawa gave him a blasphemous talisman that gave him his wealth, a large *Santo Cristo* crucifix. All he had to do was to whip the image with a stingray's tail (*ikog nga pagi*), and it will "vomit" strength (*kusog*) and money (*pilak*). It is also said that his deal with the Yawa also caused him to have horns (*sungay*) similar to the devil. Another supposed legend says that Dela Rama receives sacks of money from "a mysterious person" every Tuesday and Friday, symbolic of Holy Tuesday and Good Friday in the Holy Week, commemorating Christ's suffering and crucifixion.<sup>11</sup>

There are two versions regarding the supposed demise of Dela Rama. In one version, it is said that he "grew a long tail and his whole appearance was *transformed* into the likeness of *Yawa*." Embarrassed by his new state, his family

supposedly locked him up in their Iloilo estate, perhaps never to be seen again. In another story, when he was buried, he became one and the same with the Devil Yawa and never truly died and he would periodically emerge from his tomb.

Ironically, it appears that Dela Rama truly gave the name "nagmalitong yawa" a materialized form instead of the actual heroine of the same name.

## Conclusion

The findings on Yawa could be summarized by the following points:

1. He and Nagmalitong Yawa are not the same people, and the former predates the latter.
2. He has an undisputed pre-Hispanic presence in Panay and the Waray regions of Samar and Leyte.
3. He is a *banwanon*, a forest spirit, in terms of his role or function as a deity.
4. He belongs to a race of giants in Bisayan lore - *Muwa* in Panay and *Onglo* in the Waray regions - based on scant references of his appearance.
5. He is malevolent, which is probably the greatest factor that led to his later demonization.
6. Evidence of his association with Satan occurred about 70 years after Legaspi's arrival, perhaps *even earlier*.
7. His new Devil persona is reinforced by centuries of literary, religious and folk preservations within a Roman Catholic environment.

All these data leads to an inevitable change due to the already infamous reputation that the Yawa already had. There is a similar "lord of the mountain" figure in Kelabit folklore in Sarawak or Northern Borneo: the giant *Puntumid* (Janowski, 2014). He was once a human, the supposed ancestor of the Kelabit people, but he metamorphosed into his monstrous form of red eyes, long hair, and white skin after an accident in a hunting trip, where his heels were twisted "that it faced forward." As the

*engkantos* are at their most powerful because at this time, God [the Son] is dead. It is also during this time that gathering materials for anting-anting, or its general use, is at its most effective (Magos, 1992; Brioso, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> The occurrences of the term in both BKH and MBB were personally counted and verified by the researcher.

<sup>11</sup> It is a common belief, especially in the provinces, that Good Friday is the annual time when



legend goes, he decided to remain in the forest and hunt humans, however he did promise that in exchange, he will also bless humans with wild pigs during hunting trips (very similar to Yawa). When Evangelical Christians arrived in that region of Borneo in the 20th century, the natives easily abandoned the cult of *Puntumid* and now pray to Jesus Christ for pigs. It is even remarked by his last followers that “he was heard crying in the forest” over this new religious development. While it is still uncertain if *Puntumid* suffered the same rebranding as Yawa, it goes to show that even the natives themselves will almost immediately abandon their own deities, especially the malevolent ones, in exchange for a far more “loving” variant. This is the Christian message after all, that the Supreme God became flesh to save humans from the sufferings of the world. Although animistic elements persist, the central appeal of Christianity was its benevolent God and saints that could be exploited for earthly and spiritual gain (Jocano, 1965) without the deadly repercussions of venerating a forest spirit of capricious or downright harmful character. In terms of his malevolent nature, Yawa’s violent behavior against women in Alcina’s account appears to reflect some connections with the Carcar rape incident with the Devil Yawa being a supposed advocate of sexual violence.

This research is still far from over; the researcher has only breached the surface of the Yawa phenomenon. For instance, although great lengths have been presented in proving that he and Nagmalitong Yawa are distinct characters, the researcher was never able to answer what it means for her to be named “after the Yawa,” and for good reason. Her name was never explored in any of the published epics and no events whatsoever links to her “changing into the form of the Yawa.” She does transform into a man in the *Humadapnon* epics but this hardly constitutes “changing into Yawa” itself. Unless the later epics remedy this mystery, then the only way to find more information is to conduct a field study in the mountains of Central Panay, an apparent herculean task even before the quarantine implementation. Would it even be possible now?

Another possible observation of the reader is the limitation of sources on myths, legends, and stories of the Yawa in a pre-Hispanic setting, most only appearing in Alcina’s account, which by themselves are still scarce. The researcher believes, or at the very least hopes, that pre-Hispanic Yawa legends still are abundant in the entirety of the Bisayan islands, preserved in oral tradition. One

step Bisayan scholars could do is to record as many legends that they encounter regardless if heavily Christianized or not; but ideal still are indigenous ethnic groups like the Panay-Bukidnons. Who knows? Perhaps a yet to be discovered pre-colonial Yawa epic exists within the memory of an old “superstitious” man in the provinces waiting to be found by the academic community.

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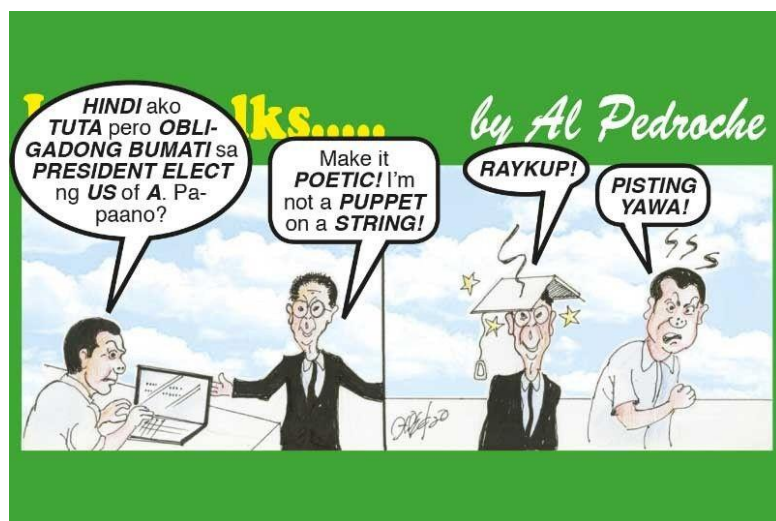
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## Appendix

### *Editorial Cartoons by Al Pedroche*

“Pisting Yawa!” (Dec. 05, 2020)<sup>12</sup>



“Pisting yawa!” (Dec. 19, 2020)<sup>13</sup>



<sup>12</sup> Link: <https://tinyurl.com/zufst8xy>.

<sup>13</sup> Link: <https://tinyurl.com/h9pwkc>.